



Dana E. Blackwell  
Executive Director

# LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

**COMMISSIONERS:**  
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WENDY L. RAMALLO, ESQ.  
SANDRA RUDNICK  
ADELINA SORKIN, LCSW/ACSW  
DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS, CHAIR  
STACEY F. WINKLER

## APPROVED MINUTES

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The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Tuesday, **September 6, 2005**, in room 743 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim transcription of events at this meeting.**

### COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Carol O. Biondi  
Hon. Joyce Fahey  
Ann E. Franzen  
Helen A. Kleinberg  
Dr. La-Doris McClaney  
Rev. Cecil L. Murray  
Sandra Rudnick  
Adelina Sorkin  
Dr. Harriette F. Williams

### COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Patricia Curry  
Daisy Ma  
Stacey F. Winkler

### APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

The agenda for the September 6, 2005, meeting was unanimously approved as amended.

### DIRECTOR'S REPORT

- The department has jurisdiction over 42 children in care in Louisiana, split between relatives and pre-adoptive homes, but has been able to contact only 25 of them. Dr. Sanders said that the numbers of DCFS children in Mississippi and Alabama should be available later this morning.

The state of Texas has agreed to take responsibility for displaced children in the dependency systems of the affected states, but Dr. Sanders did not know the details of how that would be accomplished, nor what provisions were being made for children in the delinquency system.

- Dr. Sanders reviewed “Changing Practice in a Large Urban Setting,” a presentation made at a recent Children’s Bureau conference. The document, created from data gathered by U.C. Berkeley, charts county and state progress on Federal and state indicators on improved safety for children in care, improved timelines to permanency, and reducing reliance on detention. Departmental strategies to address these outcomes include structured and team decision-making, point of engagement, the concurrent planning redesign, and Permanency Partners Planning (P3).
  - The percent of re-abused children has dropped. Dr. Sanders will provide the Commission with real numbers.
  - The rate of substantiated child abuse or neglect in foster care has also dropped, though it is still above the state level. Dr. Sanders will provide the Commission with numbers of unsubstantiated allegations as well.
  - The recurrence of abuse and neglect in homes where children were not removed has remained steady, and it is lower than the state’s overall level. The impact of structured decision-making will probably not be seen until this year; Dr. Sanders noted that fewer than half of California’s counties are using this technique.
  - The time that children are in out-of-home placement has steadily declined, though the percent reunified within 12 months is significantly behind the state figure. This may relate to the lower percentage of re-abuse being seen.
  - California made a dramatic improvement in the percent of children adopted within 24 months; though the county is improving, it is significantly behind the state.
  - The number of Los Angeles County children in out-of-home placements has dropped from 41,252 in 1998 to 23,637 in 2004.
  - Nearly 89 percent of children in care for 12 months had no more than two placements; this both exceeds the Federal standard and surpasses the state’s percentage. The longer children are in care, however, the lower this percentage becomes.
  - The rate of foster care re-entry has dropped slightly, though it is better than the state’s overall level.

Commissioner Kleinberg asked about the relevance of comparisons with other counties and the state: if departmental changes mean that Los Angeles County’s children in care now have far more serious problems than before, will this skew the numbers? Dr. Sanders agreed that comparisons are difficult, and the Federal approach to these standards is different than that of the department. The statewide drop in numbers of children in out-of-home placement, for example, is almost all accounted for within

Los Angeles County. DCFS has fewer children coming into care, but more children in care overall, and child well-being worsens the longer children are in the system.

- Dr. Sanders distributed the July 2005 quarterly outcome and accountability data reports for California and Los Angeles County, required by AB 636 and published by the California Department of Social Services. With regard to the very low percentages of children who are being placed with all their siblings, Dr. Sanders acknowledged that siblings have not yet been a focus for the department, though he hoped that team decision-making and other ‘front door’ resources, such as the use of foster family agencies that specialize in sibling groups, would help. The availability of placements is one issue: foster families are licensed to take a maximum of six children, and may already have three or four at any given time.

Sibling issues are crucial to family reunification, and Commissioner Kleinberg expressed concern that the emphasis on family is missing from the documents distributed at today’s meeting, as is the significance of visitation. Social workers often face decisions about breaking family bonds when younger siblings may be appropriate for adoption, for example, while older siblings are not. She suggested forming a group to look at sibling relationships, and Commissioner Fahey concurred, saying that it was a complicated area. Chair Williams agreed that decisions involving siblings of different ages and with different behavior issues, for instance, are not easy.

Commissioner Sorkin raised the question of children under age three—20 percent of DCFS children—in measuring the time to reunification. With concurrent planning for these children, this should be a six-month window, not the 12 months stated in the Federal standard. Also, if any member of the sibling group is under three, the requirement for six-month permanency applies to the whole family. As of June 2005, the department has jurisdiction over 6,000 children under the age of two, and 25 percent of its population is under the age of four. If these children’s bonds with their parents are not maintained, reunification becomes a moot issue.

Dr. Sanders said that data on these populations could be captured internally, but would not be reflected in these reports of Federal and state indicators. Commissioner Kleinberg suggested carving out information on younger children to get an idea of what’s happening with this population, since the monthly statistics in the placement documents don’t address outcomes. Data is not traditionally broken out by age group, but Leo Yu, Deputy Director has been approached about what is available, and Chair Williams asked Commissioner Kleinberg to bring back recommendations and design ideas to the Commission for this proposed report. If resources are needed to do this tracking, Commissioner Sorkin suggested asking First 5 L.A. to fund the development of additional screens in CWS/CMS.

Vice Chair Biondi questioned the numbers of youth emancipating from foster care and receiving high school diplomas, and Dr. Sanders will double-check the source of these report figures. She also asked about the possibility of the state’s using either percentages or absolute numbers, rather than both, which can be confusing.

## **NOMINATING COMMITTEE REPORT**

Commissioner Fahey announced the slate of officer candidates to be voted on at the September 19 meeting.

- Chair: Helen Kleinberg
- Vice Chairs (two positions): Sandra Rudnick  
Daisy Ma  
Nina Sorkin

Commissioner Fahey would also like to discuss the possibility of re-instituting the position of immediate past chair, for which there is precedent in Commission proceedings.

## **PERMANENCY INITIATIVES**

Long-Term Foster Care Trish Ploehn reviewed the overall goals of the department, beginning with prevention approaches that assist families in their homes. When for safety reasons children must be detained, concurrent planning for permanency (if they cannot return home) begins immediately. Permanency options include reunification, adoption, and legal guardianship, but keeping children in long-term foster care is not seen as a positive alternative—although over 13,000 children and youth are currently in those long-term placements.

Permanency Partners Planning (P3) was begun a year ago to explore permanency options for children aged 12 and older in long-term foster care. The program has expanded through the department over the last nine months, but it is very expensive and work-intensive, and so far has been able to assist only a small percentage of youth. To speed the process, a work group on achieving permanency has been established and will kick off its plan this month to reach two goals:

- A 20 percent reduction across the department of the number of children in long-term foster care
- A 20 percent reduction within each office of the number of children in long-term foster care as of September 1, 2005

The work group has identified strategies for overcoming barriers to permanency at both the office level and the broader department level—including training, public message, contracts, partnerships, legislative change, and office support. Managers will develop their own office-specific plans, deciding which target population they will focus on—by placement type, rate, or age group, or by some cross-section of those criteria. The work group has drafted a plan template, a matrix outlining financial issues, and the formalized levels of authorization for any recommendation for long-term foster care. An additional work group has also been established with Judge Nash and court personnel to build collaboration between the department and the courts. Commissioner Winkler has agreed to participate on this work group.

Commissioner Rudnick urged safeguards so that reaching these numerical goals won't mean that children are put in danger. Ms. Ploehn agreed that safe reunification is foremost, but she believes that at least half the children in long-term care can move to an alternate plan very quickly. Commissioner Fahey expressed concerns about children in stable placements, especially with relatives, being disrupted; she recommended concentrating on group homes and foster homes, and excluding children placed with relatives. Ms. Ploehn assured her that no stable situation would be disrupted; oftentimes, relatives say they have not been asked to adopt or formalize a legal guardianship, and they are happy to make those arrangements. Commissioner Fahey warned that some families might see these quotas as a threat, since every six-month review addresses why caregivers won't make a permanent commitment. P3 staff have encountered these situations, Ms. Ploehn said, and the department is aware of their sensitivity.

Commissioner Kleinberg cautioned that a time-related numerical goal could mean a rush to reunification, and the work group's plan doesn't address the visitation necessary before that can be successful. Appropriate visitations take time and work, and the lack of them can lead to problems. Commissioner Sorkin asked if the department would help parents who have terminated their parental responsibility file a 388 petition, if the parents' attorneys do not. Vice Chair Biondi questioned the numbers of children in long-term care, and Tiffany Collins said that the 13,000+ figure had come from April 2005 data; legal guardians with open cases are included in the permanency placement sheet.

Vice Chair Biondi also asked about the theory of letting each office decide how it will meet the goal. According to Ms. Ploehn, the idea sprang both from Dr. Sharon Watson's 2004 report on permanency and from Dr. Sanders' wanting to empower the individual offices. Essentially, offices will be deciding what target population they wish to start with, not developing drastically different ways of doing things.

Concurrent Planning Redesign: Nancy Chess reported that the concurrent planning redesign is being piloted in five regional offices: Lakewood, Belvedere, Covina, Compton, and North Hollywood. The initiative seeks to engage birth parents, children, relatives, siblings, and nonrelated extended family members with social workers, supervisors, team decision-making facilitators, and other partners to work on permanency planning from the outset of each case.

Starting in January 2005, emergency resource families (relatives, foster parents, nonrelated extended family) have also been trained to be involved in this process. Once their training and home studies are complete, they are approved as both foster parents and adoptive parents both, and must commit to working with birth families on reunification. Their goal is to fully engage with birth parents and children, encouraging their connection by sharing information and focusing on the child's needs. This is done from a strengths-based, family-centered perspective that includes planned and purposeful visitation and reasonable efforts to facilitate reunification. If reunification efforts are not successful, emergency resource families provide permanence through adoption or legal guardianship. (Ms. Ploehn will provide Commissioners with the number of families currently trained.)

Beginning with emergency response workers, a detailed family background is obtained on birth parents (offending and nonoffending), siblings, relatives, and other significant adults in the child's life to involve these people in planning. Frequent assessments of the child and the family are done, and ongoing case planning uses the team decision-making approach. Children under age three may be fast-tracked to permanency if they meet certain legal criteria, but concurrent planning is taking place for every child entering the system. Ms. Chess related a success story of a 15-year-old girl, placed in foster care because of significant physical abuse, whose parents remained uninvolved until her foster family declared themselves willing to discuss adoption and legal guardianship. This jolted the girl's birth family into action and, after appropriate visitation and education, she ended up going home. Jurisdiction over her case will be terminated soon.

Noting that only five offices are piloting the concurrent planning redesign, but all offices must reduce the number of children in long-term care, Commissioner Kleinberg asked if critical components of concurrent planning were being learned piecemeal. Ms. Chess stressed that all offices have been fully trained in concurrent planning, and all the components she outlined were being used by each office. The pilot offices are simply instituting some new systems changes, alternate work shifts, and additional tools, along with an emphasis on the cultural change of each worker taking primary responsibility for whatever piece of the process he or she is working on.

Permanency Partners Planning (P3): Tiffany Collins reported that P3 is now established in 16 of the 17 departmental offices, and that hiring in Hawthorne is expected next week. The program began in October 2004 in the Lakewood office through the Consortium for Children, which hired 12 part-time permanency partners. The other 15 offices are being served by 41 retirees whose hiring began in April 2005. Santa Fe Springs recently brought on a staff member from the Community College Foundation.

To date, P3 staff have served 258 cases. Of those, 75 (29 percent) now have a permanency plan active, including 11 youth who are home with their parents, 19 adoptions in the works, and 33 legal guardianship plans. (Now that both adoption division staff and P3 staff are stationed in regional offices, staff can more easily work together on adoptions.) Ms. Collins related one story in which a girl and her father were reunited after 14 years; that family will be recognized by the Board of Supervisors on September 13.

The scheduled presentations on Hollygrove and on family conferencing strategies were postponed until the next Commission meeting.

#### **CHAIR'S REPORT**

- Two new members have been appointed to the Commission: Susan Friedman, from the Third District, and Wendy Ramallo, Esq. from the First District.
- The department has announced a new division chief in human resources, Cheryl Nagash.

- At the Commission's recent meeting with Board deputies, Deputy Nick Ippilito suggested that a meeting be arranged to discuss the issues of foster youth who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. If Commissioners are interested in participating in this meeting, please contact Dana Blackwell. Vice Chair Biondi urged the inclusion of probation youth in these discussions, since their involvement with the system has almost always originated on the dependency side.
- Commissioner Winkler has offered to host the Commission retreat in her home, and Commissioners were urged to let Ms. Blackwell know their availability on October 3 and November 7. The retreat date will be confirmed shortly.
- Chair Williams commended SCSW Claudia Bustillo Cook for an outstanding back-to-school event organized for the kinship resource center in Santa Fe Springs.
- Under a tutoring program mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, thousands of students—and nearly all foster youth—are each eligible for approximately \$1,500 in tutoring funds. Hundreds of local schools are participating, including 174 in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Commissioners were urged to help get the word out so that families understand this resource is available to them. The deadline to apply is September 30, 2005, and applications are available in the Commission office.
- Chair Williams thanked the department's editorial staff for including Commission member names in the summer edition of the DCFS News.
- A permanency planning conference will be held on September 16 at the Biltmore Hotel.
- Flyers are available in the office for the family-to-family cluster meeting in SPA 8 on September 20 and 21.
- A workshop on the Brown Act is scheduled for October 6 at 10:00 a.m. in Room 374-A of the Hahn Hall of Administration.
- The Association of Community Human Service Agencies (ACHSA) annual luncheon will be held on October 20 at the Biltmore Hotel.

#### **PUBLIC COMMENT**

There was no public comment.

#### **MEETING ADJOURNED**

Chair Williams asked that today's meeting be adjourned with a moment of silence in honor of those in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi affected by Hurricane Katrina